

Fencing specialist celebrating a decade of trading

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Few fencing contractors can claim to provide more of a nationwide service than Gillies Fencing, working from locations in Suffolk, south Essex and near Fort William in Scotland. All types of fencing is supplied and erected, but the company's speciality is working in difficult to reach, and sensitive locations, something which started during its early days providing a service for estate owners and farmers in the Scottish mountains. David Williams reports.

Paul Gillies set up Gillies Fencing, based in Suffolk, just over 10 years ago, having previously worked with his father, a forestry consultant, helping him with his contracting side of the business based at Roy Bridge near Fort William. The family forestry business had grown over several decades, Paul's father having establishing commercial and native forest in areas which were remote and, at times, almost impossible to reach with machinery. After leaving school, Paul worked for a local estate owner as a shepherd but when the sheep were sold his employer, who also had a large farm in East Anglia, urged Paul to go to college in England and while studying Paul worked part-time with cattle and sheep on his farm in south Suffolk.



Recently-installed stud fencing.

As well as looking after the stock, Paul carried out general farm tasks and while ploughing one day, was told that the field he was in needed fencing. Paul quickly headed back north to his father, borrowed the necessary tools and equipment, and returned to Suffolk to erect the fences. This quickly led to offers of more fencing work and Paul set up his own fencing business. When, a few years later, Paul's father died, Paul took over the running of the contracting side of the Scottish business, running it alongside his own in the south, and now divides his time between the two areas, constantly investing in extra machinery and staff to meet the growing demand for the company's services.



"We now work all over the UK," explains Paul. "The areas in which we are based are all very different; from the rugged Scottish Highlands to the marshes of Kent and the arable farmland and woodland of East Anglia. We do a lot of work in Kent, and have staff based in south Essex who tend to look after the work in the area. It is mainly stock fencing for sheep in the salt marshes, and our experience of working in relatively inaccessible places helps us where other companies might struggle."

The company's staff includes eight in Scotland, working in four teams of which three are erecting fences and one team is stripping out old fencing due for replacement as well as carrying out specialist pesticide applications and tree planting. Paul is based in Scotland for several days each month, planning and quoting for work and providing support to his teams. In the south there are seven full time employees including an administrator, a contracts manager and three lead fencers. Paul's partner, Claire also helps out when needed; "As well as looking after our young son Angus, Claire will jump on a tractor if

needed, or drive out to get supplies for the teams working on site. It is very much a family business," he says.

The machinery fleet consists of four Fendt tractors, all of which are usually equipped with Bryce Suma post knockers, two Kubota 2.5t mini diggers, a fleet of Ifor Williams trailers and seven Mitsubishi pick-up trucks. A recent acquisition is a specially designed and adapted tracked dumper, fitted with a rear three point linkage and with a bespoke Bryce post knocker, the unit capable of operating in the sensitive Kent marshes, as well as in the steep mountain areas in Scotland. Paul explains that he has a very good working relationship with Bryce Suma managing director Jock Bryce, having used his products for many years, and the new post knocker, with its 720kg hammer, was designed by the two of them together for the application.

For areas where access with a vehicle is not possible at all, a pair of air driven post drivers is available to the teams, powered by a mobile compressor and allowing posts to be knocked in long distances from access roads and tracks.



For the Scottish operation, a more extreme solution is sometimes required and, for approximately one day per month, a helicopter with special lifting equipment is hired in to transport bundles of fencing to where they are needed for the erection of new fence lines, the helicopter capable of lifting a month's worth of fencing in a day to areas which more conventional transport vehicles would be unable to access. Using the helicopter is very expensive, but to maximise efficiency all the bundles of fencing are made up and laid out during the weeks prior to lifting so that the operation is non-stop on the day, and while travelling back to base with the helicopter after the fencing task, Paul will often tie in smaller lifting jobs for farmers and estate owners, such

as moving construction materials for small hydro-electric schemes or carrying out deer counts, to help justify the cost. Once the fencing is all in location and ready to be erected, a fleet of Honda ATVs is used by the fencing staff to travel to and from the work areas each day, but some slopes are too steep or rugged even for these.

Most fence work in the Highlands is deer and stock fencing, some contracts running into upwards of 15 miles at a time. Where the surface is bare granite, preventing posts from being knocked in, holes are drilled in the rock, and steel prongs 'glued' in place, the posts mounted securely on top. The fencing is carried out for agencies such as the Forestry Commission as well as large private estates, some of Paul's clients including well-known household names. Recently, the business has become involved with 'woodland development projects' in which Paul provides a tender to manage an area of woodland for an agreed number of years, from planting and fencing against rabbits and deer, to weed management and general maintenance. "I enjoy that sort of work," explains Paul, "as the projects can be small areas right up to large plantations, and because the work is over a period of five years or more, it is satisfying seeing the results and its benefits to the environment."



In East Anglia and across the south most of the company's work is stock and rabbit fencing, from horse paddocks to protecting crops in orchards and on farms. Permanent rabbit fencing has become something of a speciality, and Paul explains that the biggest trigger for farmers calling him is when they sit in the combine cab and watch the yield meter drop when working near the field edges at harvest; "We always receive calls as soon as harvest starts," he comments. "These days many farmers and farm managers operate the combines and when they see the reduction in yield caused by rabbits they will quickly realise that investing in decent quality fencing is easily justified. In many cases, the cost will be covered within one growing season."

Fencing and clearance work in connection with environmental schemes gives Paul a great deal of satisfaction. "We have considerable experience of operating within the guidelines and restrictions which form part of many environmental schemes and enjoy helping landowners plan what will work in a particular situation. Recently we have worked with the Forestry Commission in its projects to fight ash dieback. Twenty seven areas of two to four hectare blocks close to existing woodland throughout East Anglia have been cleared and securely fenced, and thousands of young ash trees planted of 8-10 different species. Almost all will die within a few years due to the disease, but it is hoped a few will survive, and these will be trees carrying resistance to the condition. From these, cuttings will be taken and more trees planted, to re-establish ash trees in the countryside, but with the resistance needed," he explains.



Working with the Forestry Commission on ash dieback recovery schemes has created some large clearance and fencing projects for Paul and his team. Pictured is fencing to keep animals including deer and rabbits out of one of the young tree plantations in mid-Suffolk.

HLS schemes form another area of Paul's business which has increased in recent years. Having worked with Natural England on many occasions, and with familiarity of what is expected and required, as well as having the machinery necessary to operate in sensitive areas while minimising ground damage, means he is usually able to advise landowners as to what will be acceptable. He also suggests alternative solutions that might work better for both the landowner and the environment. An example of this is at a farm near Sudbury, Suffolk belonging to Hill Farm Assington Partnership where a shallow valley was badly overgrown and in need of clearance to use for grazing by a herd of Galloway cattle. While clearing the land, the landowner wanted to maximise its environmental value with contributory funding from Natural England.

Initial studies quickly revealed the presence of a large breeding colony of rare water voles, and the plans had to be adapted to allow the area's use for grazing as well as preserving the voles' natural habitat. "We cleared the scrub," says Paul, "and working in a very wet boggy area it was quite a challenge. We installed bridges across the stream as well as fencing to divide the land for winter and summer grazing and designed and fenced a handling area for the cattle. One side of the stream was dug out and the other bank was left untouched. The work took quite a while, but now that the land has recovered it is very rewarding seeing the landscape and knowing we have managed to produce the result wanted by the client, both for his farm and for the wildlife.



An area cleared and fenced for winter and summer grazing in south Suffolk as part of an HLS environmental scheme. The presence of water voles meant extra care was needed, and the experience of Paul and his team working with Natural England on previous projects was reassuring to the landowners, Mr and Mrs Brooks-Crossman. The handling area for the rare breed Galloway cattle was designed by Paul in discussion with the landowners and installed by his team.

Landowner, Mrs Brooks-Crossman was delighted with the result; "We were keen to have the valley cleared but wanted the work carried out as part of an HLS scheme. Part of our consideration in choosing Gillies Fencing was that the company had worked with Natural England previously and was familiar with the rules. Working with Paul was a huge weight off our minds as he understood what was needed to comply, and he gave us the confidence that the work being done was appropriate and when challenges arose he was able to propose solutions that were practical for us and acceptable to Natural England. We are delighted with the result, the fencing quality is excellent and Paul's team that worked here were friendly, professional and a pleasure to have on site, and James Watts, who was the lead fencer, was always very obliging.

"I would have no hesitation in recommending Gillies Fencing at all. Paul is a lovely person, easy to work with and extremely reliable," she adds.

For scrub clearance Paul has invested in a heavy duty flail mower which is driven by one of the 200hp Fendt tractors. "It is incredible," comments Paul. "Saplings and scrub up to three inches diameter are taken out easily and quickly and with the tractor on wide tyres it travels over softer ground without creating deep ruts. We use it for clearing overgrown woodland as well as for larger grass areas, so it is very versatile and saves us a lot of time."

As well as stock, deer, rabbit, horse and boundary fencing, Paul carries out groundwork projects for clients. "We will help to design, and then build complete projects such as horse manèges, driveways, tracks, stock handling yards and conservation ponds and, because of the amount of work we do with stock, will often install cattle grids and gateways. Projects completed during the past 10 years include manèges up to 3,600m², and access tracks to woodland and conservation

areas. Clients often want conservation ponds in some quite inaccessible areas and with our range of machinery we can complete the tasks without destroying the surroundings.

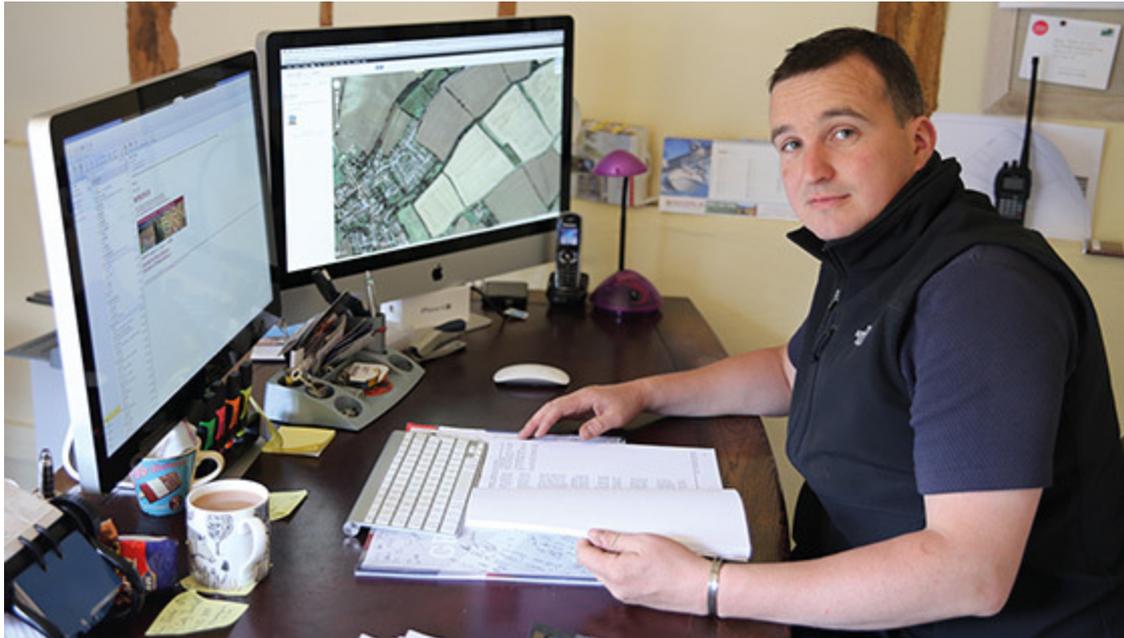


A manège installed and fenced by Gilles Fencing.

"I love working with the farmers, and I enjoy knowing many people in the industry," says Paul. "Our team has built up an excellent reputation and it is satisfying to receive calls from land owners to who we have been recommended. Driving around the countryside and seeing fences we have installed looking straight and doing what they were designed to do years after installation is very rewarding. And when I see a field which a year before had been decimated by rabbits now with healthy crops as a result of the rabbit fence we have erected, it makes me proud.

"There are threats to the business, and the trade; we have tried some of the environmentally friendly treated green timber posts for fencing projects and within a very short time they are suffering wear and tear from the weather. Creosote-treated posts last many decades and at present we just can't see a viable substitute if the fence is needed to be durable, although we are always keen to work with the most environmentally-friendly products where practical," he adds.

As well as running his fencing and groundwork business Paul has his own herd of Gascon beef cattle. He began rearing the cattle on his croft in Scotland while employed as a shepherd, the Gascon breed native to the French Pyrenees and known for its hardiness. Now the herd is being grazed on land belonging to the father of his partner Claire, near their Suffolk base, and Paul still enjoys working with them.



Paul says seeing fencing installed by his company looking good years after installation gives him a great deal of satisfaction.